

# The Act of Digression in Academic Novels

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One cannot go to the novel expecting a series of events connected with academicians, it is a psychological novel dealing with a psychic personality who happens to be a student. Holden is sent out of three institutions because he does not want to be a "phony," by habitually or constantly abiding by the rules and regulations. What he aspires for is being true to his own feelings at a particular point of time. Further his opinions and judgements are always in a state of flux. But because of this unsettling sense of the flux of things there has developed within Holden a compensatory desire for permanence. That is why he loves the museum where everything is what it was when he was a young boy. He says the museum is "the only nice dry, cozy place in the world" (C.I.R: 120).

His love for the museum reveals his aspiration for permanency in life. Each and every incident in the novel shows that every time he feels he has realized a degree of stability, later on he is frustrated that the stability is lost. He is not able to follow the codes he lays to himself. In other words, we can also term him as a "spent personality". For instance, he tells us that he thinks Sally Hayes to be a phony girl, but later we find that in his fantasy he wants to marry her. He says he wants to be a dumb boy pouring petrol into vehicles. This shows his urge to digress. Holden Caulfield is a replica of the present day students whose urge is to transgress the rules and regulations of any institution.

He is unable to fulfill his aspirations. He wants to be a catcher in the rye (ie) a preserver of innocence but he himself engages a prostitute to satisfy his physical lust. Though his ambitions are high, they do not materialize because of the inherent desire in him to transgress the rule he lays to himself. This makes him inconsistent in his attitude. In spite of his declared hatred for schools and colleges, he is proud of the academic achievements of Allie and Phoebe. Though he wants to be a catcher in the rye, he himself is in dire need of someone to warn him or someone to shelter him.

Holden himself is not mature enough to be a Catcher. He does not want to conform as an adult does. As Warren French points out, Holden makes a cult of childism

because "he sees no role for himself in the adult world" (Salinger: 199) but his refusal to grow up is the negation of the very organic principle, the basis of all his attacks on the mechanistic and the institutional. The irony is that Holden has no role in the child's world either. Whatever role he takes up, he wants to digress from that and he says "It's more interesting and all" (C.I.R: 183).

After all, Holden has a point especially if his story about Richard Kinsella, the boy who made a speech about a farm his father bought in Vermont but who got side tracked along the way, is even half true.

They kept yelling "Digression!" at him, the whole time he was making it, and this teacher Mr. Vinson gave him an 'F' on it because he hadn't told what kind of animals and vegetables and stuff grew on the farm and all. What he did was, Richard Kinsella, he'd start telling you about this letter his mother got from his uncle, and how his Uncle got polio and all when he was forty two years old, and how he wouldn't let anybody to see him with a brace on. It didn't have much to do with the farm - I admit it - but it was nice. It's nice when somebody tells you about their father's farm and then all of sudden got more interested in their Uncle. I mean it's dirty yelling "Digression!" at him when he's all nice and excited (C.I.R: 184).

The Catcher in the Rye is packed with indictments against prep school education - its small-minded students, its boring classes and conformist atmosphere. The unwillingness of Holden to participate in the destructive games that the Oral Expression crowds play is a sure sign of courage. He even refutes Antolini saying that "lots of time you don't know what interests you most till you start talking about something that doesn't interest you most" (C.I.R: 184). Holden wants teachers to be liberal in their evaluation of students. He feels that an added piece of information regarding any particular topic will do no harm. In other words, Holden favors digression in any topic and he feels it is not a crime to do so.

But Antolini again argues with Holden telling him that Kinsella should have thought of the topic in his room itself rather than in the class. Further Antolini tells him that a student learns from his mistakes. "Once you get past all

the Mr. Vinsons"; what looms ahead isn't education so much as history, poetry:

You'll find that you're not the first person who was even confused and frightened and even sickened by human behaviour, you're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many many, men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept record of their troubles. You'll learn from them - if you want to, just as somebody, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement (C.I.R: 189).

Sansford Pmsker agrees with Antolini's statement that, Education is an offer. An opportunity but one that requires that imagination first be tempered by voices of the past and then be disciplined by the writer who wishes to add his or her installment to the larger saga of how a self wrestles with the claims of society. As Mr. Antolini puts it "I don't want to scare you but I can very clearly see you dying nobly one way or another for some highly unworthy, cause" (C.I.R: 188).

What is to be noted here is that Holden is too angry to see beyond the Mr. Vinsons and their obsessions about sticking to a thesis. Moreover, what Holden observed earlier about Mr. Spencer - "you can't stop a teacher when they want to do something" (C.I.R: 11). equally applies to Mr. Antolini. Although Holden feels that, "Mr. Antolini is about the best teacher I ever had" (C.I.R: 174).

Yet he is still a teacher and once he is launched into a stumped speech, all Holden can do is sit there iolden is tired and exhausted and feeling sleepy, Something else, an academic education will do for you. If you go along with it any considerable distance, it'll begin to give you an idea what size mind you have. What it'll fit and may be, what it won't. After a while, you'll have an idea what kind of thoughts your particular size mind should be wearing. For one thing, it may save you an extraordinary amount of time trying tempered by voices of the past and then be disciplined by the writer who wishes to add his or her installment to the larger saga of how a self wrestles with the claims of society. As Mr. Antolini puts it "I don't want to scare you but I can very clearly see you dying nobly one way or another for some highly unworthy, cause" (C.I.R: 188).

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I started thinking that even if he was a flit he'd certainly been very nice to me. I thought how he hadn't minded it when I'd called him up so late, and how he'd told me to come right over if I felt like it. And how he went to all that trouble giving me advice about finding out the size of your mind and all (C.I.R: 194).

He learns that nothing is sacred and nothing safe. He understands that in the course of time, innocence always has to give way to the world's pressure. He utters, "That's the whole trouble you can't even find a place that's nice and peaceful because there isn't any." His own experiences have taught him the above stated fact. He knows that to "cling to a vision of a prelapsarian world, one without "falls" and without the complexities of sin, is to pitch one's tent in such lands as never were and can never be." An adolescent must grow up into an adult by gaining knowledge of the world's events. Realization dawns on him when he sees that people have written, "Fuck you" in the same room where the Egyptian mummies are kept. Because of this he allows Phoebe to reach out for the gold rings on the carousel.

His behavior towards Sally also illustrates that he is honest to the core and also that he doesn't fail to express it. For instance, Holden at one point admires Sally and he can describe her as looking so good.

<sup>U</sup>I felt that I was in love with her and wanted to marry her" (C.I.R: 124).

Later he states, <sup>U</sup>I didn't even like her much" (C.I.R: 124).

He can even go to the extent of telling her that he loves her. "It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I meant it when I said it, I'm crazy, I swear to god I am" (C.I.R: 125).

These three statements of Holden can either reveal his utter honesty or his inherent urge to digress. He does not mind going back on his own statements but only that he wants to be true to the moment. For instance, he reveals his feelings regarding school and New York in general:

Well, I hate it (school), Boy do I hate it, I said', 'But it isn't just that. It's everything. I hate living in New York and all Taxi cabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door and

being introduced to phony guys that call the Lunts, angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks, and people always (C.I.R: 131).

Thus Holden does not like anything which is in a state of change or movement. He likes only the museum where everything remained the same forever. Also he liked Jane because she always kept her kings in the back row in a game of chess. That Holden prefers the static nature of life against movement is clearly revealed in the above instances. But later, towards the end of the novel, he learns that human life is subject to change. This is clearly illustrated in the powerful image of Phoebe on the carousel.

The image is destined to change. Though she is moving in a circular way yet she will reach out for the brass ring, thereby risking "a fall", but also that Holden is now prepared to allow for the possibility. He cannot "Save" her, from all the risks and joys, that, taken together, constitute life ~ nor is he any longer willing to try. Part of the sheer joy in the moment is a newly quiet acceptance, partly born of exhaustion, partly of relief of the human condition as it is, and must be (Pinsker: 94).

The urge to digress is revealed in the first part of the novel. Towards the end there is the stoic acceptance of life as it comes. There arises the question - why does Holden want to digress, earlier? The answer is inbuilt in the novel itself. Holden digresses because he felt that an alternative world could be constructed in one's fantasy as against the real world. For example, he fantasizes as if he is moving west. He has a vision of an idyllic life.

How would you like to get the hell out of here? I know this guy down in Greenwich Village that we can borrow his car for a couple of weeks. He used to go to the same school as I did and he still owes me a couple of bucks. What we could do is, tomorrow morning we could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there, see it's as beautiful as hell up there. It really is... I have about a hundred and eighty bucks in the bank. I can take it out when it opens in the morning and then I could go down and get this guy's car. No kidding, we'll stay in these cabin camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out. Then, when the dough runs out, I could get a job somewhere and we could live somewhere with a brook and all and, later on we could get married or something. I could chop all our own wood in the winter and all. Honest, to god we could have a terrific time (C.I.R: 132).

That Holden is a king of digressors is revealed later when he replaces his ideal destination of Massachusetts and Vermont, with that of the west, where he plans to lead a simple life, pumping gas and pretending he is a deaf mute.

Pd build me a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life. Pd build it right near the woods, but not right in them, because Pd want it to be sunny as hell all the time. Pd cook all my own food and later on if I wanted to get married or something, Pd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me she'd have to write it on a goddamn piece of paper, like everybody else. If we had any children, we'd hide them somewhere, we could buy them a lot of books and teach them how to read and write by ourselves (C.I.R: 199).

Holden does not think of what the listener or the reader would think of him because he says only what he feels in his heart of hearts.

In other words, he feels he is a genuine person. But he is not so, because he is suffering from schizophrenia where there is a marked separation of a person's mind and feelings, causing at last a drawing away from other people into a life of the imagination. That is why, for a short duration, he lives in the world of the imagination and forces Sally to run away with him.

But to dismiss the whole story as the ramblings of a neurotic would be doing injustice to Holden's story. He only suffers from bouts of insanity. At other times he issues forth statements which reveal his shrewd nature and also his non-conformist tendency. For instance, he says:

In the first place I'm sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the disciples for instance, they annoy the hell out of me. If you want to know the truth the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus was that lunatic and all that lived in tombs and kept cutting himself with stones (C.I.R: 99).

That Holden does not like Jesus' disciples is something which can be accepted, but his preferring the lunatic to others reveals that Holden is against the norm where people fall as a mass for their heroes. Here he falls not only for a minor character but a lunatic. This reveals that he has a fatal attraction for minor characters not hot shots, but those who follow their bents without compromise or apology. "That the larger world misunderstands them is proof if any were needed, that they are authentic rather than phony, innocent as opposed to corrupted" (Pinsker: 68).

Hence we find that Holden is not for anything that is conventional. He does not agree with the mass that Jesus' disciples must be revered rather he is against them for he feels that when Jesus "was alive, they were about as

much use to him as a hole in the head" (C.I.R: 99).

Holden is not for hero worship, rather he develops a choice based on his own feelings at that particular instant. This is seen in his dislike for the word "grand". On the other hand, we find that "Sally Hayes is for all that is conventional and socially "correct" which Holden is not" (Pinsker: 105).

This is evident in his conversation with the nuns, who talk about Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, far more candidly, far more generously than Holden had thought possible. He had thought that the nuns would not speak so openly but they had no inhibitions on the subject and this comes as a shock to Holden and also for an "instant liking" towards them.

Later also he prefers the kid who sings an incorrect version of "comm through the Rye" that begins "If a body catch a body coming through the rye". Again he opts for a vocation, which is also a digression from the norm. For instance, he does not want to be a doctor or an engineer but a "Catcher". This is "digression" to the utmost. Never has anyone thought of such a vocation (i.e.) catching innocent kids from falling off a cliff. "This is the novel's central image" (Pinsker: 74).

He says: "What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they are running and they don't look where they are going, I have to come out from somewhere and catch them" (C.I.R: 173).

Holden had harbored such designs in his mind but later he learns that innocence has always to give way to the pressures of the world. For instance all through the novel we find that the "phony" is petted against the "authentic."

Holden demands in everything "the highest standards of purity," In this way again he digresses from the norm. It is only slowly that he comes to the realization that life cannot be categorized as "pure" or "impure". That he is for absolute purity is revealed in the following line wherein he states that:

Even if he were to become a better lawyer than his father ~ one who would go around saving innocent guys lives all the time. Even if you did go around saving guys lives and all, how would you know if you did it because what you really wanted to be, was to be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddamn trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in dirty movies? How would you know you weren't being a phony? the trouble is you wouldn't (C.I.R: 172).

If the motive behind every task is found then one would

know if a task is phony or true. But Sansford Pinsker is against such "rigid applications of the test of altruism" (Pinsker: 59). He insists that there must be a distinction between what one does and whatever a "psychiatrist might offer up as its motive. Otherwise all great people even Mother Theresa would land up being a phony" (Pinsker: 59).

But Holden does not stick to one particular idea or way of thinking, always he proves to be a digressor. Holden feels that if one does not involve oneself in the "rat race for money then one could save one's soul" (Pinsker: 60).

But it is he who is all the time spending lots of money going in cabs, spending for the nuns and so on. Also at the same time he is worried about spending it because he had to go to a date with Sally Hayes. On seeing the nuns, he says that he hates it "if I'm eating bacon and eggs and somebody is only eating toast and coffee."

After (the nuns left), I started getting sorry that I'd only given them ten bucks for their collection. But the thing was, I'd made that date to go to the matinee with old Sally Hayes and I needed to keep some dough for the tickets and stuff. I was sorry anyway, though goddamn money. It always ends up making you blue as hell (C.I.R: 113).

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